The Thought of Work

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Introduction

• My research has advocated the explicit use of frames of reference that recognize assumptions and values regarding the objectives and operation of the employment relationship

  

• But what about how we conceptualize work?
  
  • Often overlooked, unstated, and/or narrow
Introduction

• My starting point: How do thinkers think about work?
  • Not occupations, job quality, working conditions, deskilling, etc.
  • But fundamentally thinking about what work is
    • What are its roles? What does it mean to us?
      • Individually  • Societally
    • How do we conceptualize or model work?
      • And why is this so important?

• Result: John W. Budd, The Thought of Work (Cornell University Press, 2011)
## The Broad Scope of Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sphere of Activity</th>
<th>Remuneration</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outside the Home / Household</strong></td>
<td>Paid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wage and salaried jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Casual employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Within the Home / Household</strong></td>
<td>Household-based farming</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family-run businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Home-based contract work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(putting out system)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Broad Scope of Work

• Work touches many aspects of life, so it is studied by numerous disciplines, such as
  • Anthropology
  • Archaeology
  • Economics
  • Geography
  • History
  • Human Resources
  • Industrial Relations
  • Law
  • Org. Behavior
  • Philosophy
  • Political Science
  • Psychology
  • Sociology
  • Theology

• But the academic division of labor tends to create non-competing, balkanized conceptualizations of work
The Broad Scope of Work

• Work touches many aspects of life, so it is studied by numerous disciplines, such as

Objective: bridge the academic division of labor to promote a deeper, multidisciplinary understanding of work by extracting, integrating, and synthesizing the rich intellectual conceptions of work found across the humanities and the social and behavioral sciences

• But the academic division of labor tends to create non-competing, balkanized conceptualizations of work
The Many Faces of Work
The Many Faces of Work
Conceptualizing Work

- Using the disciplinary theorizing on work found in the humanities and social and behavioral sciences...

- Work as
  1. a Curse
  2. Freedom
  3. a Commodity
  4. Occupational Citizenship
  5. Disutility
  6. Personal Fulfillment
  7. a Social Relation
  8. Caring for Others
  9. Identity
  10. Service

Each Chapter
- History of the idea
- Key meanings
- Implications
  - Research
  - Practice
- Limitations
Conceptualizing Work

- These conceptualizations do not simply describe alternative perspectives on work
  - They actively structure our understandings of and our experiences with work by providing frames of references, norms, values, and attitudes toward work that actors translate into specific practices

Conceptualizations of work

Research questions
- HR practices
- Public policies
- Judicial interpretations
- Social approval
- Economic resources
Conceptualizing Work

• Work as
  1. a Curse
  2. Freedom
  3. a Commodity
  4. Occupational Citizenship
  5. Disutility
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Remainder of my presentation
• Describe each of the 10 conceptualizations
• Consider some implications
  • Research
  • Private and public policies
Work as a Curse

- Work as an unquestioned burden necessary for human survival or maintenance of the social order
  - A god’s curse such as God’s curse of Adam and Eve
    - Hard work as penitential activity to seek redemption
  - The curse of those at the lower levels of the natural social hierarchy
    - Aristotle’s natural slaves
    - Polluted castes
    - Today’s “marg workers
  - Take this Job and Shove It
    - Work expected to be lousy and without deep meaning so little need for questioning, reform, etc.
Work as a Curse

Andy Capp (May 31, 2007)
Work as Freedom

• Freedom: “the absence of necessity, coercion, or constraint in choice or action” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

1. Work as the freedom to create
   • Imposing culture on nature (Arendt’s *Homo faber*)

2. Work as freedom from others
   • Lockean property rights / political liberalism
   • Freedom to contract / economic liberalism
   • Work creates the independence needed for being seen as a citizen and as a contributing member of society
   • But perhaps time to re-think the Western view of dominating / mastering nature
Work as a Commodity

- Rise of economic liberalism and industrial capitalism leads to a society of individual “traders”
  - What’s being traded? work effort
  - So work becomes seen as a commodity:
    - An individual’s capacity to work—that is, their physical and mental capabilities, or what Marx called “labor power”—is thought of as an abstract quantity that can be bought and sold
    - Work is nothing more than a generic input into a production function, and employers and workers buy and sell generic units of this commodity called work (or labor power)
Work as Occupational Citizenship

- Labor is not a commodity; rather, workers are human beings who are members of communities and societies
  - To see workers as citizens is to decommodify them and give them a status as more than just factors of production or individuals seeking personal fulfillment or identities
- Occupational citizenship: the achievement of rights to which employees are entitled because of membership in a human community, and which are attained by institutional rather than market forces
- Work as an activity pursued by human members of a community entitled to certain rights and standards
Work as Disutility

• Why do we work?
  • When work is a commodity, we work in order to earn money

• In mainstream economic thought, individuals maximize a utility function increasing in goods, services, and leisure
  • Work is important for providing these goods and services (directly or indirectly)
  • But work itself is assumed to *reduce* utility
    • Work is strenuous and painful
    • Work conflicts with pleasurable leisure
Work as Disutility

• So work is disutility: a lousy activity tolerated only to earn income to buy goods, services, and leisure that provide pleasure

• Need extrinsic rewards to compensate for effort

Hagar the Horrible (June 3, 2009)
Work as Personal Fulfillment

• But what about a worker’s psychological well-being?

• Contrary to English language usage, workers are not just “hands” (farmhand, factory hand, deckhands (“all hands on deck”), kitchen hands, etc.)

Hagar the Horrible (February 10, 2011)
Work as Personal Fulfillment

- Work as physical and psychological functioning that (ideally) satisfies individual needs
  - Inner joy of serving God (various theologies)
  - Esteem and self-actualization after physiological and safety needs are fulfilled (Maslow)
  - Achievement, competence, challenge, and personal growth (Herzberg)
  - Job satisfaction
- Work as mental stimuli—an activity that arouses cognitive and affective (emotional/attitudinal) functioning
Work as Personal Fulfillment

• Note: Work as Personal Fulfillment is an important, but often unstated, intellectual foundation of human resource management (HRM)

• Goal of HRM: improve individual and organizational performance by recognizing the human factor inherent in employees
  • Design work that provides satisfaction and intrinsic rewards (fulfillment)
  • Use tools that identify individual psychological differences (e.g., ability or personality) to select the right employees for the right jobs
Work as a Social Relation

• Individuals do not work in isolation; they interact within networks of bosses, co-workers, customers, and others

• Work does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs within a social structure of social institutions (social norms, conventions, rules, and procedures) and power relations

• Work is therefore also theorized as a social relation
  • Human interaction experienced in and shaped by networks, social institutions, and power relations
  • A social exchange constrained by social norms, and governed by societally-defined rights to resources
Work as a Social Relation

Zits (May 23, 2005)
Work as Caring

A popular symbol for Danish women fighting for equal pay in the early 1970s, as displayed on a Female Workers Confederation’s plate in the Workers Museum, Copenhagen
Work as Caring

- Feminist scholarship: Unpaid housework and other caring activities that do not produce economic commodities is *real work*
  - Work as caring: the physical, cognitive, and emotional effort required to attend to and maintain others
- Reveals gendered work experiences
  - Working women frequently bear a disproportionate of the burdens of household work
  - Working women confront gendered expectations about appropriate occupations, pay, and work behaviors that are frequently rooted in idealized visions of caring, domesticity, and femininity
Work as Identity

• Work as something that helps make you sense of who you are and where you stand in the social structure
  • Not just a source of economic or psychological utility, but a source of psychological and social meaning
• Derived from the role of work at various levels
  • Personal identity: descriptors related to one’s work
  • Social identity: occupation, employer, and other group associations
  • Interactionist identity: role identities negotiated with society
  • Human-kind identity: work as the way humans are a “conscious species being” (Marx)
Work as Service

- Serving not yourself or your immediate family but...
  - God’s Kingdom
    - Work as co-creation
    - Work as a calling
  - The household enterprise
    - East Asian Confucian norms on the importance of the multigenerational family
  - The community
    - Volunteering and civic service
  - The nation
    - Military and economic nationalism
Work as Service

Dong Yong, selling himself to bury his father, as an exemplar of filial piety
Work as Service

Admiral Nelson’s HMS Victory: “England expects that every man will do his duty.”
Conceptualizing Work

- Work as
  1. a Curse
  2. Freedom
  3. a Commodity
  4. Occupational Citizenship
  5. Disutility
  6. Personal Fulfillment
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Conceptualizing Work

- Each conceptualization represents an important way of thinking about work within one or more academic disciplines or philosophical/theological traditions.
- Each forms a foundation for a certain paradigmatic approach to analyzing and designing work, work-related institutions and practices, and related issues.
- Thus, many uses of this framework:
  - Deepen our understanding of work, and work-related practices and institutions.
  - Broaden perspectives on HR issues (e.g., motivation).
  - Improve cross-disciplinary academic discourse.
  - Reveal work’s fundamental importance for individuals and societies.
Implications

• Important Note: these conceptualizations do not simply describe alternative perspectives on work
  • They actively structure our understandings of and our experiences with work by providing frames of references, norms, values, and attitudes toward work that actors translate into specific practices

Conceptualizations of work

Research questions
  HR practices
  Public policies
  Judicial interpretations
  Social approval
  Economic resources
The ideas about work held by different groups of scholars affect their research by making certain issues interesting, rendering other issues unimportant, and guiding the analyses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commodity</th>
<th>Occupational Citizenship</th>
<th>Disutility</th>
<th>Personal Fulfillment</th>
<th>Social Relation</th>
<th>Caring For Others</th>
<th>Identity</th>
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## Research Implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Commodity</th>
<th>Economists analyze labor demand and labor supply by modeling hours of work as an optimization prob.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Citizenship</td>
<td>Rejecting primacy of markets, ER scholars analyze the diverse range of institutions that govern work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disutility</td>
<td>Personnel economics focuses on the use of extrinsic incentives (pay for performance, tournaments, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Fulfillment</td>
<td>I-O/OB scholars emphasize cognitive and affective mental processes (job satisfaction, justice, mood)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Relation</td>
<td>Sociologists analyze norms and power structures at work (e.g., labor process theory)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring For Others</td>
<td>Feminist scholars analyze the sexual division of labor, gendered work issues, and the human body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Postmodernists analyze how discursive practices shape work-related subjective identities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practical Implications I

• By providing the intellectual foundation for designing particular employment practices, ideas about work also shape how individuals experience work in practice

• Alternative conceptualizations of work yield contrasting views about conflict and consent in the employment relationship
  • What are the perceived barriers to obtaining full work effort from employees?
  • What motivational strategies can employers use to obtain higher levels of employee engagement and effort?
## Practical Implications I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work as...</th>
<th>Barriers to Full Work Effort</th>
<th>Implications for Work Motivation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Curse</td>
<td>Work is painful, monotonous, etc.</td>
<td>Preach acceptance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disutility</td>
<td>Work is painful; leisure is preferable</td>
<td>Provide financial incentives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Fulfillment</td>
<td>Work is stressful and unfulfilling</td>
<td>Structure work to be intrinsically rewarding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Work is regimented, constrained, and scripted</td>
<td>Allow for creativity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Citizenship</td>
<td>Work lacks minimum standards and voice</td>
<td>Guarantee minimum standards and voice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Practical Implications I

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<tr>
<td>A Social Relation</td>
<td>Work is structured to serve the interests of the powerful</td>
<td>Structure work to force compliance; create norms that disguise inequalities and that obligate effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring For Others</td>
<td>Work is structured in ways that devalue caring for others and that serve the interests of men</td>
<td>Structure work to reduce discrimination and conflicts with other spheres of human life</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Practical Implications I

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<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Work creates a negative or contradictory sense of self</td>
<td>Structure work to create a desirable sense of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Work is viewed in ways that devalue serving others rather than commodity production</td>
<td>Structure work to value and provide opportunities for serving others</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- More generally, the conceptualizations provide diverse perspectives on, and thus deeper understanding, of human resource management
Each of the conceptualizations of work also has important implications for how we think about worker well-being and thus employment regulation.
## Practical Implications II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Curse</th>
<th>Work expected to be lousy and without deep meaning so little need for / justification for employment regulation.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Primacy of individual freedom means that freedom to contract and freedom to quit are key regulatory concerns. Also, importance of creative work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commodity</td>
<td>Efficient allocation of labor is foremost concern. Policies that promote labor mobility are key. Ignores unpaid and other forms of non-commoditized work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Citizenship</td>
<td>Employment regulation can be a key method for supporting the achievement of citizenship rights, including minimum labor standards, safety standards, and protections for collective employee voice.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Practical Implications II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disutility</th>
<th>Work is expected to be lousy so minimal need for regulation. Work is only important for producing income so this is the focus of regulatory concern, but need to guard against creating disincentives to work.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>Work should be psychologically rewarding, but subjective, unitarist, and collective assumptions favor managerialism over shared governance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fulfillment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Relation</td>
<td>Socially-created institutions and power structures are recognized as important elements of work, so employment regulation should address (and also reflect) these issues of institutions and power.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Practical Implications II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caring For Others</th>
<th>Recognizes non-commoditized forms of caring for others as work, and draws attention to the need to include these forms of work in conversations about employment regulation.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>Sees the deep importance of work for individuals, and thereby provides a basis for substantive employment regulation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Recognizes non-commoditized forms of serving for others as work, and draws attention to the need to include these forms of work in conversations about employment regulation.</td>
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</table>
Ideas About Work Matter

• Conceptualizations of work shape research, practice, and policy agendas
  • Influence how we understand work…and how we experience it
• But the role of these ideas is frequently limiting
  • Researchers focus on questions rooted in one or two ways of thinking about work
  • Practitioners design employment practices based on a focused conceptualization of work
    • Especially work as disutility or personal fulfillment
• Need to embrace diverse conceptualizations of work
Conclusion

• Goal is to think fundamentally about what work is
  • How do we conceptualize work?
• Research and practice would benefit from recognizing this complexity by incorporating of a broader range of ideas about work into a multidisciplinary approach
  • And therefore into the resulting theories and policies
• The ten conceptualizations reinforce the deep importance of work for the human experience
  • Work is too important to take for granted, but too complex to be reduced a single conceptualization
# Conceptualizing Work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Curse</td>
<td>An unquestioned burden necessary for human survival or maintenance of the social order.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>A way to achieve independence from nature or other humans, and to express human creativity.</td>
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<td>A Commodity</td>
<td>An abstract quantity of productive effort that has tradable economic value.</td>
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<td>Occupational Citizenship</td>
<td>An activity pursued by human members of a community entitled to certain rights.</td>
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<td>Disutility</td>
<td>A lousy activity tolerated to obtain goods and services that provide pleasure.</td>
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### Conceptualizing Work

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Personal Fulfillment</td>
<td>Physical and psychological functioning that (ideally) satisfies individual needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Social Relation</td>
<td>Human interaction embedded in social norms, institutions, and power structures.</td>
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<td>Caring for Others</td>
<td>The physical, cognitive, and emotional effort required to attend to and maintain others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Identity</td>
<td>A method for understanding who you are and where you stand in the social structure.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>The devotion of effort to others, such as God, household, community, or country.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Further Reading

Contact Information

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